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Political Ecology, Development, and Human Exceptionalism

Abstract

The sub-discipline of Political Ecology devotes much critical attention to the complex and often pernicious socio-ecological impacts of mainstream development - developmentality - across the world. However, despite the 'ecology' in its name, Political Ecology continues to be predominantly anthropocentric which, we contend, compromises its critique of developmentality's excesses. Drawing on recent literatures in philosophy, political theory, and human geography, we argue that both the more-than-human and social impacts of developmentality are enabled by zoöpolitical logics of human exceptionalism which support anthropocentrism. We suggest that the adverse effects of development are co-constituted with the positive vision of human wellbeing which runs through developmentality. Thus, an effective critique of development will necessarily have to address the zoöpolitical logics that underpin anthropocentrism. Doing so will strengthen the rigour of political ecology's engagement with developmentality and widen its attention to the diversity of life harmed by mainstream development.

Main Paper

1. Developmentality and Political Ecology

The post-colonial era has seen the rise of “human development” as a global socio-political goal (Sen 1999). While development is a multifarious concept, its dominant form today is that of capitalist development, involving the widespread use of fossil fuels for energy, globalization of manufacturing, and the creation of a consumer class weaned on products recognizable throughout the globe. This standard model of development aka “developmentality” (Deb 2009), centred around consumption-fuelled economic growth and surplus accumulation, has depended on the intensive exploitation of people and nature, thereby adversely impacting societies and ecologies throughout the planet.

Political ecologists and other social scientists have dedicated much attention to the complex and often harmful effects of mainstream development (Escobar 1995; Walker and Bulkeley 2006; Penz, Drydyk, and Bose 2011; Peet, Robbins, and Watts 2011; Shrivastava and Kothari 2012; Ukridi and Walter 2011; Kirshner and Power 2015). However, the critical and theoretical focus of Political Ecology, like many other sub-disciplines of geography (as also the social sciences in general) has remained predominantly on people - on the human communities that are displaced and subject to the excesses of the development project (some exceptions: Collard and Dempsey 2013; Emel and Neo 2015). Indeed, Political Ecology has arguably devoted far more attention to critiquing efforts to protect nonhuman life from the harms caused by developmentality than to developmentality itself (Brockington and Igoe 2006; Buscher et al. 2012; Roth and Dressler 2012). In this piece, we examine the implications of Political Ecology’s anthropocentrism in a context in which processes of development are predicated on the exploitation of nonhuman nature – and the reproduction of such exploitative relations within the human realm.

While there is much harm implicated in developmentality, this harm and the violence that often goes along with it, are grounded in a theory of *human wellbeing*: underlying a vast extractive machine is a vision of a ‘good’ life and the pursuit of happiness (Kenny and Kenny 2006). Our goal in this essay is to place that positive goal in the context of ongoing violence against both human and nonhuman life and to ask whether it is enough for political ecology to critique the former while not paying much heed to the latter.

Specifically, we bring together recent scholarship in philosophy, political theory, and human geography to argue that developmentality’s pernicious social impacts are the other side of the same zoöpolitical coin that enables the treatment and exploitation of nonhuman nature as first and foremost a resource for the pursuit of human wellbeing. As such, political ecology’s primary focus on humans and human wellbeing – its anthropocentric lens – fundamentally limits its critique and analysis of developmentality’s excesses.

2. The Pursuit of Human Wellbeing

In its ultimate focus on human wellbeing, developmentality is different from older forms of exploitation, such as slavery and colonialism, both of which tended to be explicitly about extracting labour and resources from the exploited peoples. By contrast, contemporary development is decidedly biopolitical (Bakker 2013; Mezzadra, Reid, and Samaddar 2013), with its discourses and practices of entangled harm and care, and with harm being often done in the

very name of those who are being harmed. To reiterate, human wellbeing *is* the stated purpose of developmentality.

It is ironical that valorization of human wellbeing that is at the core of developmentality has the perverse consequence of marginalizing and exploiting people. What is the source of this apparent contradiction at the heart of developmentality? To understand this, it is necessary to unpack the vision of human wellbeing that is at the heart of mainstream development discourse and practice.

Developmentality articulates a very *specific* idea of human wellbeing: it envisages a ‘good’ human life as one that is freed from the vicissitudes – the risks and vulnerabilities – of living on the planet, of being a part of ‘nature’, of being animal (Clark 2011). Even the most basic of development indicators – such as that of life expectancy – are predicated on the human capacity to circumvent the risks (and inconveniences) that are inherent to living as a part of the more-than-human world (Desai and Potter 2008).

Embedded in this quest for an insulated and protected life is an ever-increasing degree of consumption – material and otherwise – aimed at enhancing comfort and pleasure, and rendered possible by the use, exploitation and redesign of nonhuman nature.¹ At the same time, this vision of human wellbeing relegates as inferior all other human ways of life – those that are less insulated from the risks posed by nature, and those that are not predicated on the pursuit of consumption, surplus accumulation, and an expanding definition of ‘basic’ needs. Alternatively, they are romanticized as a ‘different’ way of life reserved for exotic “Others”.

This idea of human wellbeing that underpins developmentality is, in many ways, the *summum bonum* of human exceptionalism. Human exceptionalism, which has been discussed widely in more-than-human geographies and cognate fields (Haraway 2008; Buller 2015), combines ontological and ethico-political claims: ontological claims about the uniqueness of human beings are bound up with claims about the ethical superiority of humans over all other life-forms, aka *anthropocentrism*. Human exceptionalism is about establishing and maintaining ontological and ethical divides between human beings and all other life-forms, especially nonhuman animals.

As discussed in the next section, the discourse of human exceptionalism has involved the deployment of zoöpolitical logics (Vaughan-Williams 2015), wherein perceived differences in certain capacities and traits are used as criteria for establishing the human/animal divide, and for making ethico-political distinctions between human and nonhuman life (Agamben 1998; 2004; Derrida 2008; 2009). Examples of such capacities include reason and intelligence, and associated technological development (Garner 2004; Srinivasan 2010; Tomasello 2014)

The zoöpolitical logics of human exceptionalism play a key role in the pursuit of development by rendering nonhuman life killable. The extractive and exploitative use of nonhuman nature as a mere resource is made possible and legitimized by rationalities of human exceptionalism. However, this is not the only role that the zoöpolitical machine, after Agamben (2004), has in developmentality.

¹ For instance, contemporary medical advances are based on a system that necessitates the violent exploitation of nonhuman animals.

Development discourse and practice co-opts and transfers zoöpolitical logics from the domain of the more-than-human to the domain of the social, the intra-human. The idea of human wellbeing embedded in developmentality goes along with the zoöpolitical relegation of those peoples and ways of life that do not meet the benchmarks of development as inferior and in need of the ‘improving’ care of development. The “privileging of European systems of intensive agriculture and property use over traditional forms of subsistence production” is an obvious example of this (Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014, 116).

In many ways, developmentality is a theory of exceptional exceptionalism. It is a theory of how human beings can maximise their exceptionalism with the recognition that all human communities are *capable* of being developed into the dominant form of human flourishing - even if only a few are *actually* there. Development is about amplifying those human features that are believed to be maximally different from other species, creating institutions that maintain that distinction, and about pushing ‘forward’ those societies that do not meet these standards of development. Human ways of life that depart from the norms of human exceptionalism set by certain societies are animalized and cast as in need of upliftment – of ‘development’ (Martinez-Alier 2009). As political geographer Vaughan-Williams puts it, it is the zoöpolitical human/animal distinction that makes possible “further distinctions within the category of the human”(2015, 6).

Thus then, our challenge to political ecology is this: the adverse effects of development aren’t due to the negative aspects of capitalism alone but also due to the positive vision of human wellbeing which runs through developmentality and is tied to the discourse of human exceptionalism. In other words, an effective critique of development will necessarily have to address the zoöpolitical logics that underpin human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. As a first step towards that, we critically examine below key rationalities that have been used to justify human exceptionalism, focusing on the human-animal divide.

3. Human Exceptionalism and Anthropocentrism.

A compelling reason for anthropocentrism is that humans are responsible to other humans in ways they aren’t for other life-forms. Human exceptionalism strengthens that claim for preferential care by arguing that as beings who have unique and exceptional qualities, humans deserve a standard of care that exceeds that of other beings, and that the instrumental use of other beings is acceptable in the pursuit of human wellbeing. Of course, this human circle of care need not necessarily involve causing *harm* to other beings but neither does it preclude harming other creatures in the service of human excellence and wellbeing. The use of animals in medical research is driven by such arguments.

Human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism tend to be defended in the philosophical literature in two ways: through arguments about capacities, and arguments about identity. These arguments have mostly been about zoöpolitical distinctions between humans and other animals (Vaughan-Williams 2015). This is arguably because humans and other animals share those vulnerabilities (Derrida 2008), which are the key subject-matter of ethics and justice, therefore making it necessary to rationalize the ethical de-prioritization of nonhuman animals. This is evident in Descartes’ circular justification for the denial of animal sentience. To him, the denial of animal sentience “absolves them [humans] from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals” (Descartes 1991, 366). In other words, the zoöpolitical rationalities for human

exceptionalism and anthropocentrism have focused on undermining the “continuities in...goods and harms” experienced by humans and other animals (Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014, 119).

Capacity-oriented arguments posit that there are unique human capabilities of absolute importance - such as intelligence, rationality, consciousness etc. In this scheme, humans are truly exceptional creatures, the head of a great chain of being (Lovejoy 2011), which is why human flourishing is to be privileged above all else. Identity-oriented arguments hold that humans should ethically and politically prioritize human flourishing alone since it is only humans who share our identity and have access to our mode of flourishing.² We examine both sets of arguments more closely below.

3a. The Capacity Argument

What are the criteria for ethical consideration? One line of reasoning says it's the presence of certain capacities for pain and pleasure, intelligence, rationality and autonomy and since humans possess these capacities in a manner that other animals do not, they (other animals) are of lesser ethical significance. However, the uniquely human possession of these capacities can be questioned.

The chief among capacities used to determine ethical significance is that of sentience: the capacity to experience pleasure, and more importantly, pain. It is accepted that sentience is not a uniquely human capacity (Armstrong and Botzler 2008). Research has for long shown that the capacity for pain and pleasure is widespread in the animal kingdom, present in most vertebrates, including birds and fish (Meijboom and Bovenkerk 2013). More recently, there is good evidence to support the capacity for pain, sentience and consciousness in insects and other invertebrates (Barron and Klein 2016). Humans have always known this. Why else would we use cattle prods and horse-whips?

Then there is the question of *who* feels the pain. Who is the subject of that experience? The capacity to feel pain is related to having the capacity to possess subjective states of consciousness. Many scientists are convinced that consciousness is widespread in the animal world (Garner 2010). In fact, consciousness and perspectival view of the outside world is arguably a universal evolutionary adaptation, i.e., an integrated consciousness capable of experiencing pain and pleasure is evolutionarily advantageous to any tactile creature (Barron and Klein 2016). That said, would we use animal 'models' in medical experiments if their physiologies were utterly different? There is a larger point here: the way *animals* are used is different from the way *things* are used. Humans use animals for medical experimentation and scientific research precisely because they are like us.

Despite similarities in physiology and mental functions, animal sentience and other cognitive faculties such as language, rationality, consciousness, intentionality continue to be questioned or even denied. This is fundamentally because of the communication gap between humans and other animals (Srinivasan 2015). The ability to communicate and the ability to read intentions, “theory of mind” (Goldman 2012), is central to how we perceive the pain, suffering and cognitive faculties of other beings - human and animal. Humans continue to be challenged in their ability to understand the cognitive capacities of other animals in the absence of an unambiguous mode of inter-species communication (Srinivasan 2015).

² We can see both arguments in play in the defence of American Exceptionalism, which alternates between being the greatest nation on earth and saving the American way of life.

Capacity-oriented accounts of human exceptionalism represent what Mendieta (2011, 8) refers to as “metaphysical chauvinism”; the capacities used to make ethical distinctions are based on what humans possess and animals are seen as lacking: animals are not as intelligent as humans; they do not have consciousness or rationality of the kind found in humans (Wolch 1998). In other words, capacities that are always already unfavourable to animals are used to validate human exceptionalism.

3b. The Identity Argument.

If capacity-oriented arguments focus on internal features of humanness, such as cognitive faculties and sentience, the identity argument looks at external - usually social - features of humanness. In barest terms, anthropocentrism is justified in terms of the special obligations that humans have to other humans because of the common identity of being human.

This justification, however, overlooks the *shared* intra-human identities, such as being a man, or belonging to a particular race or ethnic group, that have been used to justify preferential treatment and exploitation *within* human society. It is to address the violence and exploitation that stems from identity-based prioritization that Amartya Sen (2006) has pointed out that identities are not exclusive - we are simultaneously Indians, academics and women, without one trumping the needs of another. In other words, there is no reason to believe that the proper role of identity is one of exclusion: affirming an identity need not deny others, and that includes the identity of animal.

Another feature of identity-based arguments is the ‘displacement’ concern (Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014). This refers to the argument that addressing injustices to animals will divert attention from or cause harm to marginalized human communities, especially those with community-specific negative interactions with nonhuman animals, such as kosher/halal slaughter in Europe, beef consumption in India, and dog fighting in the US (Kim 2015; Srinivasan and Rao 2015). However, justice is not a zero sum game; it is possible to challenge discrimination against marginal human communities while also addressing more-than-human justice. Moreover, the selective foregrounding of animal suffering is itself a consequence of mainstream ideas of animal wellbeing that depend on conceptions of ‘unnecessary suffering’ that are conditioned by majority views of that term (Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014). For example, beef eating in India is considered to cause suffering to a sacred animal but the greater violence of dairy farming is neglected by the vast majority of Indians (Kasturirangan, Srinivasan, and Rao 2014). In such a context, a shift towards a systematic account of animal wellbeing, and away from overly context-specific ones, is probably one way to address many majority-minority conflicts about the treatment of select animal species.

4. Political Ecology beyond Anthropocentrism

In the previous section, we examined key zoöpolitical logics of human exceptionalism to argue that neither human capacities nor human identities are unique or rigid in a manner that precludes nonhuman life from societal frameworks for ethics and justice – and thus from the ambit of Political Ecology. As Agamben (1998; 2004) and Derrida (2008; 2009) have separately argued, the human/animal divide is a primarily a political device to make distinctions between “those who are the proper subjects of justice and those who are not” (Srinivasan 2015, 300).

These zoöpolitical distinctions between human and animal are both intrinsically troubling and all too easily replicated within the human community. As Vaughan-Williams (2015) and others

have noted, the human/animal distinction that is foundational to anthropocentrism is that which enables the marginalization and violent exclusion of human 'Others' through the strategies of dehumanisation and animalization.

While Vaughan-Williams makes these observations in the context of border control, refugees and migrants, in this piece, we argue that zoöpolitical logics are central to the discourse and practice of mainstream development. The human/animal distinction that underpins human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism plays a dual role in developmentality: it allows for the extractive use and exploitation of nonhuman 'Others', as also the marginalization and displacement of subaltern human 'Others'. Developmentality displaces and makes instrumental use of some human beings as well as nonhuman life in the service of a certain mode of being human. In other words, the zoöpolitical logics of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism are at the heart of not only the pervasive *ecological* harms associated with contemporary development, but also its *social* impacts.

This then calls into question the anthropocentrism of political ecology. Can a theoretical and analytical lens that implicitly subscribes to the zoöpolitical logics of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism meaningfully address a set of discourses and practices – developmentality – that deploys similar logics of inclusion/exclusion that displace and exploit both nonhuman and subaltern human life in the quest for a narrowly defined version of human progress and 'superior' human life?

In posing this question, this piece asks whether Political Ecology needs to critically revisit its anthropocentrism and the zoöpolitical logics associated with it. This would not only strengthen the coherence and rigour of the sub-discipline's engagement with the excesses of developmentality, but also enhance the reach and scope of its attention to the diversity of vulnerable life, human and nonhuman, that is harmed by mainstream development.

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